

Dionysius' Application of the Role of Theurgist on the Figure of Moses

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Introduction

The word theurgy is used to show the totality of ritualistic practise in the late antiquity. We can find traces of these practises in many authors, such as Porphyry, Proclus, Hermias of Alexandria and, among all, Iamblichus. In particular, the latter seems to be privileged source for Dionysius the Areopagite, who would conform the concept of theurgy to Christianity¹.

This study will basically compare between Iamblichus' conceptualisation of theurgy and Denys' implementation of the same along with the concept of hierurgy. More than anyone else, in fact, Denys has been capable to connect and develop Neoplatonic philosophy into Christian theology. In particular, it is stunning to see how the concept of theurgy – which is the art of taking actions in order to reach the divine – has been implemented into an already fixed organization as Denys' hierarchical structure of reality. To do so, Dionysius uses several characters to portray the different characteristics of theurgy and hierurgy, such as Jesus (the representation of the theurgist) and the figures of Moses and Hierotheos (the actual hierurgists).

The comparison between Iamblichus and Dionysius' theory on theurgy and hierurgy will be useful to ground the basis for the actual

¹ For a discussion on theurgy in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, see P. G. Pavlos, "Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite", in (ed.) P. G. Pavlos, L. F. Janby, E. k. Emilsson, T. T. Tollefsen, *Platonism and Christian thought in late antiquity*, Durham, 2019, pp. 151-181; C. Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods*, London\New York, 2014; S. Klitenic Wear, J. M. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonic Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes*, Aldershot, 2007; D. Burns, "Proclus and the Theurgic Liturgy of Pseudo-Dionysius" in *Dionysius*, 22, 2004, pp. 111-132; G. Shaw, "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite" in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 7.4, 1999, pp. 537-599; A. Louth, "Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite" in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 37.2, 1986, pp. 432-438.

core of the paper. I aim to show how theurgy has been implemented in the *corpus dionysiacum*, especially in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. The fifth book of the text is, in fact, dedicated to the sacraments and the ritualistic side of the hierarchical structure. Moreover, there is an archetype that can be identified as representative of the power of theurgy – or *hierurgy*, as we will see later – in sacraments and ecclesiastic Law.

This person is Moses, who Denys takes as *exemplum* to describe the path of contemplation and purification.

Theurgy in Iamblichus and in Denys

Most of the information we can glean about theurgy can be found in Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*. Iamblichus interprets theurgy as a τέχνη, an art that can be 'performed' by the theurgist, the person who is able to grasp the divine through tangible (and/or intangible) symbols². Literally, theurgy is a "divine activity", which at first sight seems to be close to what Dionysius meant in his *corpus*. Divination and prayers are ways in which man can grasp the divine³. On the other hand, if we sift through the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, we will not find any occurrence of θεουργική τέχνη in the *corpus dionysiacum*. What we will find, in fact, is θεουργική ἐπιστήμη, that is theurgic knowledge⁴. Thus, at first glance, it would seem that the two concepts of theurgy are antithetical. The first one would embrace the perspective that theurgy is a practise to be performed with tangible symbols⁵, while the latter seems to conceive of theurgy only as a kind of knowledge⁶.

Dionysius conceives of theurgy as something intellectual, more than practical. To be more precise, Dionysius intends theurgy in a threefold way: the theurgic knowledge, the theurgic operation and the theurgic perfection. Nonetheless, not every one of these modalities belongs to man:

Oh you, the most pious among the revered Disciples, we must demonstrate, from the supermundane and sacred Scriptures and tradition to those who have been initiated to the mysteries and

² Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* V, 23.

³ A. Louth, "Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism", op. cit., p. 433.

⁴ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*, I 1, 63. 3.

⁵ However, Iamblichus suggests that theurgy could be seen as a sort "immaterial rituality", and even Proclus talks about a kind of rituality through numbers.

⁶ Cf. Iamblichus, *De myst.* V, 18; Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* IV, 34, p. 233, 1-4.

hierarchical traditions throughout the sacred consecration, that our Hierarchy implies an inspired, divine and theurgic science [θεουργικῆς ἐπιστήμης], operation [ἐνεργείας], and perfection [τελειώσεως]⁷.

Among those three modalities, the first leads to God (θεουργικὴ ἐπιστήμη), the second belongs to God (ἐνέργεια) and the last one is work of God (τελειώσις). Theurgy, then, is not a kind of magic⁸; it is a science for the contemplation of God. The product of theurgy and the capacity to work through theurgy is an exclusive property of God.

How that can be possible? According to Dionysius, we do not produce or make any theurgy. Moreover, our hierarchy itself, since it has been created by God, is a product of God's theurgy. Our aim then is not to become theurgists – as we will see later, only Christ is, in fact, an actual theurgist – but to look at the products of theurgy and elevate ourselves through them. That is why theurgy, according to Dionysius' philosophical point of view, is not just a τέχνη, but an ἐπιστήμη. Following this line of reasoning, we can go as far as to say that the entire creation is a work of theurgy, as every level of reality imitates what stands above it⁹.

As we have just said, we cannot reproduce theurgy, as it is an ἐπιστήμη only belonging to God, but we can emulate it through *hierurgy*, the sacred act that imitates theurgy. In other words, one cannot become theurgist, but the entire creation is a receptacle for us to understand God and grasp it. Even the ecclesiastic hierarchy, and the sacraments themselves, are a receptacle for our human and fallible understanding¹⁰. It is known that Iamblichus used the word “theurgy” as an all-embracing

⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *E.H.*, I. 1, 372A: Ὅτι μὲν ἡ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἱεραρχία, παίδων ἱερῶν ἱερώτατε, τῆς ἐνθέου καὶ θείας ἐστὶ καὶ θεουργικῆς ἐπιστήμης καὶ ἐνεργείας καὶ τελειώσεως, ἐκ τῶν ὑπερκοσμίων καὶ ἱερωτάτων ἡμᾶς ἀποδεῖξαι λογίων χρῆ τοῖς τῆς ἱερᾶς μυσταγωγίας τὴν τελετὴν ἐξ ἱεραρχικῶν μυστηρίων καὶ παραδόσεων τετελεσμένοις. Throughout this article the translation is mine. We also use the Greek text: *Corpus Dionysiacum I*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla and *Corpus Dionysiacum II*, ed. G. Heil and A.M. Ritter, Berlin, New York, 1990–1991.

⁸ It was Dodds who gave a negative perspective on theurgy. Cf. E.R. Dodds, “Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism”, in «The Journal of Roman Studies», vol. 37, parts 1 and 2 (1947), pp. 55-69.

⁹ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *E.H.*, v 3, 501D.

¹⁰ Cf. S. Klitenic Wear, J. Dillon, “Hierourgia and Theourgia in Sacramental Activity” in *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist tradition: despoiling the Hellenes*, 2007.

term that covered both the human and the divine side of the theurgical practise¹¹. Dionysius, on the contrary, strictly differentiates these two worlds. How does Denys, then, deal with the human side of the theurgical practise? We can find the answer in the word *ιερουργία*. Theurgy is, as we have previously mentioned, the divine act. Denys makes use of the concept of theurgy to speak about the divine acts made towards men. Jesus, for instance, could be considered both as a theurgist and as an act of theurgy. He is both God – capable of making divine acts, then – and the Son of God, sent to the earth for men. In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Denys states explicitly that Jesus made himself man to the advantage of humankind, in order to let us contemplate divine perfection.¹² This surely is an act from God to humanity, an action made by God to our advantage, the definition of “theurgical act” seems to be the most appropriate. If Denys interprets theurgy as the divine act towards humanity (*E.H.* I, 1), then Jesus, who incarnates as a man for us, is both a theurgic and a theurgical act, as his incarnation is a theurgical act in itself, made by God to the advantage of humanity.

It can be said, not without a hint of hazard, that the substantial difference between Neoplatonists and Denys in the way they intend theurgy rests on the *direction*. To be clearer, Iamblichus viewed the theurgy as an act of God towards humanity but, simultaneously, the capacity of a man to use symbols to grasp the divine¹³. In this way, the divine was prevented from getting too close to humanity and man could contemplate the divine realizing the process of assimilation with God. Denys, on the other hand, distinguishes these two acts very strongly: humans and God remain always separated by an invisible sematic wall, at least for what concerns their acts. In Pseudo-Dionysius, then, we have a double movement. The first one is from God to creation, represented by theurgy – and incarnated by Jesus, who made himself a theurgical product and a real theurgist. The second one is from the creatures to God, following the concept of imitation and proportionality that is at the core of the *corpus dionysiacum*, and it is conveyed by the word hierurgy (*ιερουργία*). However, this concept is not used in contrast with the word theurgy. On the contrary, those two words and the concepts they convey work in parallel. Hierurgy is, literally, the sacred act of men towards God. These two actions have different directions – theurgy is directed

¹¹ Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, III. 20.

¹² Pseudo-Dionysius, *E.H.*, I 1,2; II, iii, 7; III, iii, 2.4.5.11.12.13.

¹³ Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, II.11.97-98;

from the top to the bottom, while hierurgy moves from the bottom to the top – but they are complementary. There can be no hierurgy without theurgy, which means that hierurgy cannot exist without the divine act that could get God closer to men¹⁴. Even in this case, Dionysius finds a character that embraces the concept of hierurgy.

In the *corpus dionysiacum*, Hierotheos is presented as Denys' beloved master, St. Paul's disciple, and author of the *Theological Elements*¹⁵. His name means "sacred to God", which can be interesting in view of what has been said about the difference between sacred and divine in the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*. Once again, if we put this distinction between sacrament and theurgy, then Hierotheos is the representation of the theologian. More specifically, he *becomes* a man "sacred to God", meaning that he is a man capable of filling the infinite distance between himself and God. The way Hierotheos, the man sacred to God, does this is through his works of thought. In this way, the theurgy (the divine work) is the gesture through which God stretches down itself towards us, in order to let us know him.

Under this light, Hierotheos is sacred not just thanks to his faith, but thanks to his intellectual abilities that put him close to God in a mystic and contemplative way. Hence, as Hierotheos is a sort of "mask" to hide Proclus or just a personification of Neoplatonism, this means that Dionysius strongly wanted to attribute massive dignity to this pagan thought¹⁶.

The main difference between hierurgy (sacred work) and theurgy is that everything that is *ἱερός* is a human prerogative and is always used in the attempt to grasp the divine. On the other hand, theurgy is an exclusive act of God, done to help humanity grasp the divine. Hierurgy and theurgy, then, are related because of their ultimate goal, which is the

¹⁴ Cf. P. G. Pavlos, "Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite", in (ed.) P. G. Pavlos, L. F. Janby, E. k. Emilsson, T. T. Tollefsen, *Platonism and Christian thought in late antiquity*, Durham, 2019, pp. 162-164; S. Klitenic Wear, J. Dillon, "Hierourgia and Theourgia in Sacramental Activity" in *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist tradition: despoiling the Hellenes*, 2007, pp. 98-101.

¹⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, *D.N.*, III. 2.

¹⁶ On Hierotheos as "mask" of Proclus and Neoplatonism, cf. A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, Oxford 2008, pp. 156ff; W. Hankey, "Natural theology in the Patristic period" in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, Oxford 2012; A. C. Lloyd, in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *Cambridge History of later Greek and early Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1970, pp. 302–25; R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, London, 1972, pp. 138–59.

ἔνωσις¹⁷ to God, but they are referred to two different subjects and so also their direction is totally different. The first moves from the bottom and looks upward, while the second moves from the apex towards the bottom.

We can find hints of this purpose, which highlights the difference between hierurgy and theurgy, in the *Celestial Hierarchy*. For instance, in III.2, Dionysius identifies the scope of the hierarchy as the unification (ἔνωσις) with the divine. Dionysius, then, points out that each assimilation depends on the possibilities of every element of reality. Union can only be possible by following the model of God, who is the example for every sacred knowledge and operation (ιεραῖς ἐπιστήμης τε καὶ ἐνεργείας), until each devotee becomes a mirror (ἔσοπτρα) and a divine image (ἀγάλματα θεῖα)¹⁸. In my opinion, this passage perfectly explains the difference between theurgic act, which is the original and primordial model of God, and hierurgical act, which is the imitation that needs to be pursued to reach the union with God¹⁹.

Humans can act in a sacred way, but they will never be able to create theurgical acts. At the same time, only God is the holder of the theurgical practise, in every divine person: for instance, the Father makes theurgy throughout his Son. In fact, Jesus is a product of theurgy and a theurgist himself. God is the only one who holds together his sciences: theology, thearchy, theophany, and theurgy, while humanity can only imitate these perfect sciences through hierology, hierurgy, and hierarchy. The act of imitation of God is the very first step towards the path of identification and assimilation with God. The only human who reached the apex of contemplation is Moses. Nonetheless, Moses' representation is peculiar, and it needs a more detailed analysis in a separated paragraph.

¹⁷ There are several occurrences in the *corpus dionysiacum* in which Denys talks about ἔνωσις. Cf. *C.H.*, III.2, IX.2; *E.H.*, I.3, II; *D.N.*, I.5, II.4, IV.10, V.7.

¹⁸ *C.H.*, III.2, 165A: Σκοπὸς οὖν ἱεραρχίας ἐστὶν ἢ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσις τε καὶ ἔνωσις αὐτὸν ἔχουσα πάσης ἱεραῖς ἐπιστήμης τε καὶ ἐνεργείας καθηγεμόνα καὶ πρὸς τὴν αὐτοῦ θειοτάτην εὐπρέπειαν ἀκλινῶς μὲν ὄρων ὡς δυνατὸν δὲ ἀποτυπούμενος καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ θιασώτας ἀγάλματα θεῖα τελῶν ἔσοπτρα διειδέστατα καὶ ἀκλιδῶτα, δεκτικὰ τῆς ἀρχιφώτου καὶ θεαρχικῆς ἀκτίνος καὶ τῆς μὲν ἐνδιδομένης αἴγλης ἱεραῖς ἀποπληρούμενα, ταύτην δὲ αὐθις ἀφθόνως εἰς τὰ ἐξῆς ἀναλάμποντα κατὰ τοὺς θεαρχικοὺς θεσμούς.

¹⁹ On the concept of unification with God in Pseudo-Dionysius, see F. Ivanovic, 'Union with and Likeness to God: Deification According to Dionysius the Areopagite', in Edwards M., Vasilescu E. E., *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*, Routledge, 2017, pp. 118-158.

As we have said, Iamblichus interprets the word *θεουργία* as a term that refers to religious rituals and divinations, all performed by theurgists. But, as Louth noticed, *θεουργία* is a word that means more or less the same of some others: *μυσταγωγία*, *θηρησκεία*, *ιερατική τέχνη*, *θεοσοφία*²⁰. Although Dionysius applies the two words in different situations, it is reasonable to assume that they substantially mean the very same thing, with one pivotal difference. In fact, *θεουργία* is always used by the Areopagite while he is speaking of God and its manifestations. In other words: theurgy is the act from God to men. A good example for this usage of the word could be the *Epistle 9*, in which Dionysius is talking about Jesus as a theurgist and the last supper as the receptacle. In fact, the last supper is the symbol by which Jesus gives humankind the mysteries of God, which means that Jesus gives the sacraments (bread and wine) as actual symbols of the actual mysteries of God²¹. On the other hand, Dionysius uses the word *ιερουργία* extensively while speaking about the different levels of worshippers and the ecclesiastic hierarchy in general. I do believe that, even if the two words have no substantial differences in their deep meaning, the word *ιερουργία* is used to identify the “opposite direction” of theurgy: from men to God. For this reason, it may be inaccurate to say that theurgy has become sacramentalism in Dionysius’ theology: in this way, we are missing one part of the process of creation of sacraments. On the other hand, I consider *θεουργία* as the purest sacrament officiated by God itself (i.e., the last supper), used as a symbol to teach us how to reproduce that. On the contrary, *ιερουργία* is the sacrament as we mean it: the worship of God by men through symbols. In other words: *θεουργία* and *ιερουργία* represent the two faces of the same coin, but each one is directed in the opposite direction of the other: they mirror each other, but they are practically the same thing.

Dillon has rightly argued that the Dionysian parallel to the Hellenic term *theourgia* is the term *hierourgia*, meaning that the latter is a human reproduction of the theurgical practise, whereas in the Hellenic world this distinction seem to fade²². Sacraments are a sort of reproduction of the divine work, and they are enacted in order to get closer to God’s

²⁰ Cf. A. Louth, “Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite” in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 37.2, 1986, pp. 432-438.

²¹ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ep.* 9, 1.

²² S. Klitenic Wear, J. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist tradition: despoiling the Hellenes*, 2007, p. 99.

understanding. Rituality helps not just worship God, but imitate God itself, to become similar to it. The concept of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ is always present in Dionysius' theology, in every aspect: the hierarchy, the symbolism, and the parallelism between theurgy and hierurgy are all made for humans to be assimilated to God. In other words, we could say that the ecclesiastic hierarchy, the use of symbols in sacraments, and therefore the hierurgy are nothing but the human representation of the process of ἐπιστροφή.

Dionysius uses a Hellenic-based traditional vocabulary to describe his conception of tokens of theurgy (*synthema, symbolon, sphragis, typos*)²³, which are the correspondent to Christian sacraments. The symbols surely come from the divine and human beings use them, and they are always effective, even without our action on them. Our actions are useful for us in order to receive and perceive those symbols, but our spiritual preparation has no effect of "activation" on divine symbols. Paul Rorem also noticed that the word *theourgia* is never used in Dionysius' *corpus* to describe religious rituals²⁴. Dionysian sources, mainly Proclus and Iamblichus, do not distinguish between God's actions and the human enactment of its work. In Iamblichus and Proclus, both of those actions are named *theourgia*. However, Dionysius uses the word hierurgy and the character of Moses particularly to mediate between these two sides of theurgy. So, now let us turn to the role of Moses into this tangled *scenario*.

Moses as *exemplum*

How does Dionysius integrate the role of Moses into this context? The human hierarchy Dionysius describes in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is the hybrid between the legal hierarchy (extrapolated from the Old Testament) and the celestial hierarchy. The ecclesiastic hierarchy uses the material symbols as the legal hierarchy does, in the same way Moses did while ascending to Mount Sinai, during the contemplation of God, imitating the celestial hierarchy. In other words, Moses is the conjunction between two worlds, the symbol of the symbolism used in contemplation.

²³ S. Klitenic Wear, J. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, op. cit. p. 99.

²⁴ For a discussion, see P. Rorem, "Iamblichus and the Anagogical Method in Pseudo-Dionysian Liturgical Theology", *Studia Patristica*, 18, Oxford, 1979; Id., *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis*, Toronto, 1984.

In the *corpus dionysiacum* Moses is presented as a legislator. He is the one who descends from Mount Sinai and brings the tables of Law with himself. Moses is the mediator character between humanity and divinity and his presence is predominant especially in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Nonetheless, we can only find six occurrences of Moses' name along the entire *corpus*²⁵.

In *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius stresses that Moses is the prophet who brought the Law to humankind. More specifically, Dionysius underlines that the Laws which are carried by Moses are nothing but the shadow of divine laws, copied in imitation of the divine.

Does not the tradition of the Scriptures describe that the sacred legislation of the Law was given to Moses directly from God, in order to teach us the truth, that is a sketch [ὑποτύπωσιν] of the divine and holy legislation?²⁶

In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Moses is identified as the founder of the Legal Hierarchy. This kind of hierarchy is conceived of as a conjunction between God and the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, by reason of his nominal nature. Moses, the founder, was given the task of giving the names to the things, imitating the ideal form (the Tabernacle) that was shown on the Mount Sinai.

In this legal hierarchy [τῇ κατὰ νόμον ἱεραρχία], the guidance to spiritual worship is the initiation. The initiators were those who were instructed regarding the holy Tabernacle by Moses who was the first master and guidance of the legal hierarchy. He [Moses] described the sacred legal hierarchy, referring to the holy Tabernacle, and named all the things that were made following the Law, image of the form that was shown to him in Mount Sinai²⁷.

²⁵ The occurrences of the name 'Moses' in the Dionysius' *corpus* are *C.H.* iv 3; *E.H.* V i, 2. iii 4; *D.N.* iv 4; *M.T.* i 3; *Ep.* Viii 1.

²⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, iv, 3: "Ἡ οὐχὶ καὶ τὴν ἱεράν τοῦ νόμου θεσμοθεσίαν ἢ τῶν λογίων παράδοσις ὡς αὐτόθεν μὲν φησιν ἐκ θεοῦ τῷ Μωϋσῆι δεδορημένην, ὅπως ἂν ἡμᾶς ἀληθῶς μύησιν τὸ θείας αὐτὴν εἶναι καὶ ἱεῶς ὑποτύπωσιν.

²⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *E.H.*, V i, 2: Ταύτη δὲ τῇ κατὰ νόμον ἱεραρχία τελετὴ μὲν ἢ πρὸς τὴν πνευματικὴν λατρείαν ἀναγωγὴ, χειραγωγοὶ δὲ πρὸς ταύτην οἱ τὴν ἁγίαν ἐκείνην σκητὴν ὑπὸ Μωϋσέως ἱεῶς μνηθέντες τοῦ πρώτου τῶν κατὰ νόμον ἱεραρχῶν μύστου καὶ ἡγεμόνος, πρὸς ἣν ἱεράν σκητὴν εἰσαγωγικῶς ἱερογραφῶν

In the second passage we encounter in the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*, Moses is linked with two characters: Aaron and Jesus. Aaron was not ordained priest, as he was not considered ready by Moses himself, even if he was pure and beloved by God. In this case, Aaron needs Moses to be inspired by God to ordain him as priest. For what concerns the correlation with Jesus, Moses is named because both of them are at the head of a hierarchy. The difference between Jesus and Moses is that the first one is true God and true Man, while Moses is, of course, a man, but he “divinises” himself, given his role as Prophet/Hierarchy.

In this way Moses, the initiator under the Law, did not lead his brother Aaron to sacerdotal perfection, even if he thought he was beloved by God and worthy of priesthood, until moved by a divine inspiration, depending on God who is principle of every consecration, he initiated Aaron to sacerdotal perfection. Even our divine and first Initiator of the hierarchy (Jesus, indeed, as he deeply loved humanity, made himself man for our sake) did not glorify himself, as the Scriptures say, but He who said to him: “You are eternal Priest after the role of Melchizedek”. For Jesus himself, while leading his disciples to sacerdotal perfection, although being as God leader Consecrator, principle of every perfection, nevertheless he refers to his holy Father and to the divine Spirit about the hierarchical completion of the work of consecration²⁸.

This detail is particularly important not just for the understanding of Moses’ role in the *corpus dionysiacum*, but also for the comprehension of the value that Denys attributes to theurgy and hierurgy (ιερουργία) within the hierarchical structure. Moses, who is the first legislator and could see God on the Mount Sinai – God showed himself, and this is the

την κατὰ νόμον ιεραρχίαν εικόνα τύπου δειχθέντος αὐτῷ κατὰ τὸ Σίναιον ὄρος ἐκάλει πάντα τὰ κατὰ τὸν νόμον ιερουργούμενα.

²⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *E.H.*, V iii, 5: Οὗτω Μωσῆς ὁ νομικὸς ιεροτελεστής οὐδὲ ἀδελφὸν ὄντα τὸν Ἀαρὼν εἰς ιερατικὴν τελείωσιν ἄγει καὶ φιλόθεον αὐτὸν εἶναι καὶ ιερατικὸν οἰόμενος, ἄχρις οὗ θεόθεν εἰς τοῦτο κινηθεὶς ὑπὸ τελετάρχῃ θεῷ τὴν ιερατικὴν τελείωσιν ιεραρχικῶς ἐτελεσιούργησεν. Ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ θεαρχικὸς ἡμῶν καὶ πρῶτος ιεροτελεστής (ἐγεγόνει γὰρ καὶ τοῦτο δι’ ἡμᾶς ὁ φιλανθρωπώτατος Ἰησοῦς) “οὐχ ἑαυτὸν ἐδόξασεν”, ὡς τὰ λόγια φησιν, “ἀλλ’ ὁ λαλήσας πρὸς αὐτόν· Σὺ ιερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισεδέκ”. Διὸ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ιερατικὴν τελείωσιν ἄγων τοὺς μαθητὰς καίπερ ὑπάρχων ὡς θεὸς τελετάρχῃς ὁμῶς ἐπὶ τὸν παναγέστατον αὐτοῦ πατέρα καὶ τὸ θεαρχικὸν πνεῦμα τὴν τελεταρχικὴν ἀνατίθησιν ιεραρχικῶς τελεσιουργίαν.

theurgical act – can also be seen as the first priest. He is both the first hierurgist, the one who makes sacred acts, and the one who participated in the theurgical act²⁹.

Denys speaks about Moses, Aaron, and Jesus to represent and correlate among them the different modalities to approach the divine. The paragraph of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* we are taking into consideration is, in fact, dedicated to the rituals for the consecration of the bishops³⁰. Those rituals require specific symbols (such as kneeling, the laying on hands of the bishop, proclamation, and the final hug). Every symbol has a proper and specific meaning and a value inside the ritual. Every symbol represents a determinate moment in the union between the bishop and God. The bishop, in fact, is the officiant of the rituals and, at the end of it, he proclaims the consecration of the priests. This act, which is purely nominal, is made in imitation of the first consecrator under the Law, who is indeed Moses. Moses himself, in fact, chose not to lead Aaron to priesthood until he received the order – or the illumination – from God. This means that no one can ordain himself priest, not even someone loved by God, like Aaron. The only one that can do that is God Itself. In this scenario, Jesus is the *exemplum*, as he made himself human to our advantage, and, still, he did not ordain himself as priest, in any case³¹.

Moreover, the *Mystical Theology* starts with an invocation to Timotheus, the addressee of the text, to abandon the worldly life and the frivolous activities. On the contrary, Denys exhorts him to raise his mind in order to achieve the union with the One who is beyond any knowledge. To do this, of course, it is necessary to set out on a contemplative path that passes through the sensible knowledge, then

²⁹ For a discussion of theurgy and its practise, see P.G. Pavlos, “Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite”, in *Platonism and Christian thought in Late Antiquity*, ed. by P. G. Pavlos, L. F. Janby, E. K. Emilsson, T. T. Tollefsen, Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity, London, 2019; *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. by D. Frankfurter, Brill, 2019; A. Marmodoro, I.-F. Viltanioti, *Divine Powers in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, 2017; Bonfigli S., Marmo C., “Symbolism and linguistic semantics. Some Questions (and Confusions) from Late Antique Neoplatonism up to Eriugena”, in *Vivarium*, Vol. 45, No. 2/3, Brill 2007, pp. 238-252; Rorem P., *Biblical and liturgical symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian synthesis*, Brill, 1984; Dodds E. R., “Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism”, in *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 37, parts 1 and 2, 1947, pp. 55-69.

³⁰ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *E.H.*, V iii, 4.

³¹ *He.*, 5, 1-10.

raises towards the intelligible and, finally, reaches the boundaries of rationality. At the end of this path, the boundaries of rationality fade in the divine haze that is the unknown. To represent this tangled path, Dionysius again uses the exemplum of Moses who ascends the Mount Sinai³².

Thanks to all these occurrences we can finally see the complete portrait of the characterisation of Moses, a character used as the personification of several pivotal topics that are important to Denys. First of all, from this characterization we can understand that Moses could ascend the Mount Sinai because he was purified by the contemplative path itself. This is what the legal hierarchy foresees, in accordance with divine law. The contemplative path and the immersion into the divine haze are the elements that enlightened Moses who, once he came back from the mystical ascension, was perfected³³. This process of raising, ascension and coming back led Moses to be the first hierarch among men. He is a man that had the “ability” to divinize himself to transcribe the Laws and, therefore, bring to men the correct symbols, in imitation with the divine. He can be considered as a theurgist, one could say at first, considering the fact that the power of a theurgist is exactly to use symbols, both material and immaterial.

In Dionysius, as we have said, we can still find another word in parallel with theurgy, which can fit more Moses’ character, as he is not just a legislator but also the first hierarch and exegete. This word, of course, is hierurgy. The hierurgist, then, is the one who makes the sacred acts. As we can extrapolate from the above passages of the *corpus dionysiacum*, Moses can go beyond the sounds of trumpets and the thousand lights that dazzle him. This can happen because, since he is a hierurgist, he knows the way to transcend the sensible in order to properly contemplate the place in which God abides.

What is the difference, then, between Jesus and Moses since they seem to have such similar characteristics? Even if God sent the tables of Law to Moses, and even if Moses himself ascended and descended from the

³² Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *E.H.*, V iii.

³³ For a discussion about the powers of purification, enlightening, and perfection in the person of Moses, see S. I. Johnston, “Magic and Theurgy” in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. by D. Frankfurter, Brill, 2019, pp. 694-719; R. Roques, *L’univers dionysien, L’Universe dionysien. Structure hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys*, Paris, 1954; J. Vanneste “La doctrine de trois voies dans la Théologie Mystique du Pseudo-Dionysius l’Aréopagite” in *Studia Patristica* vol. 8, 2, Berlin 1966, pp. 462-467.

Mount Sinai (metaphor of the process of *moné*, *prodos* and *epistrophé*) it was still not enough to fulfil our aim and start contemplating God. It was not enough because God did not materially show us how to *imitate* It towards sacramentalism and become similar to It. That is why He sent Jesus to us, because he could be both the *theourgist* and the *hierourgist* to show us how to properly worship God. Only Jesus, who is actual God and actual Man – and therefore He is the actual theurgist and the actual hierurgist –, could do both things. Moses gave us sacramentalism, he was the hierurgist who saw and predicted, but Jesus gave us demonstration on how to use those symbols.

As previously mentioned, Dionysius uses a wide Hellenic vocabulary dedicated to theurgic tokens to describe the Christian sacraments, which are interpreted by Denys as tokens to divinize the soul. Nevertheless, it is now clear that Denys' concept of theurgy is not a mere imitation of Proclean and Iamblichean theurgy³⁴. Denys mixed and reprogrammed the forms of pagan theurgy in a way that Christianity could accept them. In Dionysius the concept of theurgy is always strictly connected with sacramentalism, which makes Denys' theurgy far more powerful on the empirical level³⁵. Of course, the figure of Christ is central, but it can be interpreted in a double way. On the one hand, Christ and his love are the representation of the ultimate form of symbolism, because He is himself a symbol while becoming true Man and true God. His love made all this sacramentalism possible. On the other hand, Christ is the representation of the real theurgist, for he is true Man and true God. It means that he has something no one else can have, which is deity.

Conclusions

In light of these considerations, we can finally see that Moses is not a theurgist in the proper sense of the meaning, as we would say for Christ. However, Moses is the first one who could interpret the sacred symbols and was able to transcend the sensible and reason itself, following the contemplative path towards God³⁶. Moses reaches the end of the

³⁴ S. Klitenic Wear, J. Dillon, "Hierourgia and Theourgia in Sacramental Activity" in *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist tradition: despoiling the Hellenes*, 2007, p. 99.

³⁵ D. Burns, "Proclus and the Theurgic Liturgy of Pseudo-Dionysius", in *Dionysius*, Vol. XXII, 2004, p. 127.

³⁶ This can be a difficult statement, as it is still unclear if Dionysius' hierurgy is ritualistic or it can also be contemplative. I believe that hierurgy can be both things,

contemplative path in the divine haze, the cloud of unknowing, the maximum moment of ecstasy and “negative” knowledge. Negative knowledge, in fact, transcends rationality and overruns ignorance, in the un-known, in the forgetfulness. According to Denys, the apex of contemplation is a landing beyond reason itself. This is precisely the reason why every linguistic hold falls, to leave space to ignorance, which is not lack of knowledge, but the overcoming of every knowledge³⁷. In order to reach this apical moment, however, there is the need to follow every single step of the contemplative path. In other words, the contemplative path is part and parcel of the moment of ecstasy. This is perfectly symbolised by the momentous figure of Moses.

Finally, we can now have a better picture of what theurgy possibly means. According to Dionysius, theurgy stands as the divine action that *must* be imitated with sacramentalism and, in general, hierurgy. In other words, Dionysius balances the connection between humanity and divinity according to the concept of hierarchy and imitation.

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as much as we can find different levels of theurgy. Cf. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* II. 11; V. 18; IX. 1. I understand that this claim needs to be deepened more. The topic is wide and needs a paper on its own, which I will think of in the future.

³⁷ Cf. C. M. Stang, “‘Being Neither Oneself Nor Someone Else’: The Apophatic Anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite” in C. Boesel, C. Keller, *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, Fordham, 2010, pp. 59-76; V. Izmirlieva, *All the Names of the Lord - Lists, Mysticism, and Magic*, Chicago/London, 2008; A. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, London, 1989, pp. 99-111; T. Tomasic, “Negative Theology and Subjectivity: An Approach to the Tradition of the Pseudo-Dionysius”, in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 9, 1969, p. 428.

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